

“Neither Dewey nor Dubya”: An Alternative

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by Wade A. Carpenter

The headline on the cover of the March 21, 2005, *New Yorker* struck me a little oddly: “Jesus in the Classroom: The Campaign to Bring God into Public Schools.” Maybe my Lenten readings had finally caught up to me, because my first reaction was an appalled “Gosh, hasn’t He suffered enough already?”

Now that the Easter season has passed, I’m feeling better about the God-in-the-schools brouhaha and contemplating specific ways my faith might improve my teaching. I’m not looking for rationalistic bickering, literalistic proof-texting, journalistic pandering, or legal quibbling.¹ I’m looking instead for serious ideas that can help kids live well and learn better; I want to explore, discuss, and debate them in a fair-minded and thoughtful way, and apply ideas that pass the test of dialogue to those children who aren’t passing many tests of any sort.

In 2003 I was honored to guest edit an issue of **educational HORIZONS** that opened up such a dialogue.² The current issue focuses that dialogue a bit more by concentrating on the educational thinking of Jacques Maritain (1882–1973), one of the most influential Roman Catholic philosophers of the twentieth century. Maritain was in the forefront of the revival of St. Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) as the “baseline” thinker for the Catholic Church: he synthesized the natural-law philosophy of Aristotle with Christian theology, legitimated the scholastic revolution of the thirteenth century, and ultimately grounded the information age of the twenty-first. Maritain also played a central role in the extraordinary *rapprochement* of Catholics and Jews brought to fruition by the late Pope John Paul II.³ Maritain’s influence was so widely felt in the reconciliation of Catholic polity with Western democracy that the Templeton Prize-winning political theorist Michael Novak wrote of him:

In political and social thought, no Christian has ever written a more profound defense of the democratic idea and its compo-

nent parts, such as the dignity of the person; the sharp distinction between society and the state; the role of practical wisdom; the common good; the transcendent anchoring of human rights; transcendent judgment upon societies; and the interplay of goodness and evil in human individuals and institutions.⁴

Most significant for this publication, Maritain's little book *Education at the Crossroads*, written during the dark days of the war against fascism, provides a Christian foundation for education that differs significantly from the reigning Deweyan pragmatism in which most public schoolteachers have been prepared; it is not, however, incompatible with it in teaching practice. The discontinuity between the progressive agenda of the education professoriate and the more essentialist practice of most teachers in the classroom is profound, and has thus far proved intractable without the resources of faith.⁵ Maritain's gentle wisdom provides one such resource. While Dewey's influence on education is enormous and certainly worthy of the attention paid to it in schools of education, Dewey did not have a monopoly on wisdom (and indeed, I believe he would be the first to insist that he didn't), and lamentably few teachers from outside Catholic institutions have been exposed to Maritain's "integral humanism." Likewise, Maritain's thinking has an intellectual depth and quality that seems to be sadly lacking in our political leadership's thinking about education; it suggests that our morally generous attempts to "leave no child behind" must not also prevent any children from getting ahead.

Our articles on this theme begin with a study by Gerald Gutek, professor emeritus of educational foundations and history at Loyola University of Chicago, who contrasts the differences between Maritain and Dewey. Gutek concludes (in my view, correctly) that the two, though frequently polar opposites, both contain discrete elements of value to teachers. My own contribution, which concludes these pages, compares areas of similarity and possible synthesis between the two men's thinking. I believe that Maritain's approach to *pedagogy*, though congruent with and indebted to Dewey, can be extended much further. In short, I believe, Dewey's atheism does not invalidate his teaching methods for people of faith, and Maritain's Christianity can inform and inspire Christian teachers, teachers from other faiths, and skeptics alike.

Between those articles, Peter Lawler, an extraordinarily prolific professor of government at Berry College and a member of President Bush's Council on Bioethics, contributes a delightfully "pointed and polemical" essay based on Maritain's thinking. The progressive-pragmatist practice of Deweyan *naturalism*, he asserts, lacks a foundation in natural *law* that could prevent the art of teaching from being lost, replaced by shallow, mechanistic teaching "methods." That leads to a chillingly Orwellian result.

While one may argue with the inevitability of Lawler's account, it is hard to deny that education in America has indeed become a set of technical skills increasingly subject to an accountability mentality as unnatural to the field as liturgical dance is to corporate finance.⁶ Alice Ramos, professor of philosophy at St. John's University and president of the American Maritain Association, starts with Maritain and goes on to focus on his contemporary Simone Weil (1901–1943); she develops the rather startling proposition that curiosity might not always be a good thing into a lifestyle much at odds with our current pandemic of Attention Deficit Disorder. One wonders if Ramos's account might suggest an “ADD” therapy at once more effective, more healthy, and less expensive than the pharmaceutical solutions currently in vogue. Madonna Murphy, professor of education at the University of St. Francis, discusses Maritain's thinking on moral education and how it is implemented in “Blue Ribbon Schools” around the country. Steven Bell, a firmly progressive-developmental professor of psychology at Berry, provides a balance with two pungently hot-off-the-press reviews of warm-and-fuzzy education.

Occasionally I find myself worrying about the realization of the Lord's Prayer—“‘Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done.’ Now wouldn't that just mess up our current educational system, and more specifically my own bailiwick in teacher education?” Of more immediate concern to some of our fellow citizens, though, are the efforts of certain Christians to bring that kingdom about on their own. For instance, a year or two ago a Jewish friend (Steve Bell, our book reviewer mentioned above) showed me just how real such concerns are. His daughter had objected, however awkwardly, to her soccer coach and teammates' “voluntary” recitation of the Lord's Prayer before matches. It took her father's more articulate objections to end the practice. He was right: I can think of no Christian justification for imposing this prayer and the resulting peer pressure in a public school venue.

By the same token, though, I can think of no legal justification for denying anyone the solace and the challenges offered by the prayer in either following our vocations or living our lives. Don't get me wrong: I agree with the separation of church and state. Any church that *can* be separated from the state *ought* to be. The Church (upper case) has always been in some sort of close relationship with the state: sometimes supportive, sometimes confrontational, always instructive. The Church has always acknowledged a priestly role, connecting the people with their God, and a prophetic role, challenging the people in their relationships with one another. Any church (lower case) that can be separated from either of these historical roles is too theologically shallow, too historically uninformed, and too morally puny to resist the powers and principalities, much less prevail against the gates of hell.⁷ Likewise, for a

nation to deny itself the learning accumulated by religious seekers over thousands of years of experience, prayer, and study is, not to put too fine a point on it, moronic, and for a teacher to try to separate his or her faith from his or her vocation is oxymoronic (*vocare*=calling).

What the Constitution actually prohibits is either the establishment of religion or the hindrance of the free exercise of religion by the government. George Washington's Farewell Address puts forth a sensible precedent:

Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports. In vain would that man claim the tribute of patriotism, who should labor to subvert these great pillars of human happiness, these firmest props of the duties of men and citizens. The mere politician, equally with the pious man, ought to respect and to cherish them. A volume could not trace all their connections with private and public felicity. Let it simply be asked: Where is the security for property, for reputation, for life, if the sense of religious obligation desert the oaths which are the instruments of investigation in courts of justice? And let us with caution indulge the supposition that morality can be maintained without religion. Whatever may be conceded to the influence of refined education on minds of peculiar structure, reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle.⁸

As amply documented by "evangelical/liberal" Jim Wallis in his new *God's Politics*, any country can be profoundly improved by voices of faith, hope, and love whose appeals are to reason, conscience, and civility, and who have avoided the entrapments of partisanship. Among such voices have been those of Martin Luther King, Desmond Tutu, Mohandas Gandhi, and John Paul II.⁹ The "high wall of separation" metaphor was written into federal law only with the *Everson* decision of 1947.¹⁰ Although the wall does much to protect our children from zealotry, it may also be withholding from them the highest and deepest learning accumulated by many of the greatest thinkers, and helping to reduce the schools' curricula to the dull minimalism of No Child Left Behind. While it is unfair to blame the Bush administration for the bill—we have to admit it was depressingly bipartisan—we may fairly blame Dubya for the administration of the law, which has been either moronically rigid or fiendishly clever. (It is unclear which, since the evidence for its ineptitude and the assertion that NCLB is actually a brilliant "stalking horse for privatization" are equally plausible.¹¹) A free, intelligent, and kindly people can, I believe, avoid the extreme positions of Dewey and Dubya, of

Orwell and of Cromwell. In the new spirit of the Catholics Maritain and John Paul II, perhaps a better metaphor for church-state relations can be found in the timeless Jewish Mishnah: “Be deliberate in judgment, make many students, and make a fence for the Torah.”¹² A fence, after all, is protective, but it does not conceal.

Notes

1. “Pander, n. one who helps others to satisfy their vices” (*Webster’s New World Dictionary*). As far as the law is concerned, I’m afraid I’ve become so jaded that I’ve taken to calling the First Amendment the “Full Employment for Attorneys Act of 1787.” The intellectual skeptics and the Bible-beaters, however, I’m fully willing to engage, being generally convinced of their sincerity.

2. “Leaping High Walls: Lessons from Faith and Lessons for Faith.” *Educational Horizons* 82, no. 1 (Fall 2003). Another fine exposition of school law *vis-à-vis* religion is found in Charles C. Haynes, Sam Chaltain, John E. Ferguson, David Hudson, and Oliver Thomas, *The First Amendment in Schools* (Alexandria, Va.: ASCD, 2003).

3. *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994). On page 99 the Holy Father puts the change in Catholic attitude neatly: The Jews, once despised as “Christ killers,” are now looked upon as “elder brothers in the faith.” See also Robert Royal, ed., *Jacques Maritain and the Jews* (Notre Dame, Ind.: American Maritain Society/University of Notre Dame Press, 1994).

4. “A Salute to Jacques Maritain,” in *The Catholic Writer: The Proceedings of the Wethersfield Institute*, vol. 2 (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 65–82.

5. One of the best historical analyses of the progressive-essentialist phenomenon is Larry Cuban’s *How Teachers Taught: Constancy and Change in American Classrooms, 1890–1990*, 2d ed. (New York: Teachers College Press, 1993). If the public doesn’t buy into the pragmatist philosophy, why should we be surprised if the kids don’t profit from it? One-fourth of Americans identify themselves as evangelical Protestant, 16 percent as mainline Protestant, 2.8 percent Latino Protestants, 9 percent black Protestants, 17.5 percent as Catholic, 4.5 percent Latino Catholics, 2.7 percent “other Christian,” 1.7 percent Jewish, and 2.9 percent “other faiths.” Only 16 percent identified themselves as “unaffiliated,” and of those, a total of 10.7 percent as “secular” or “atheist/agnostic,” categories that could be reasonably tied to a Deweyan worldview. (John C. Green, *The American Religious Landscape and Politics, 2004*. Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, <<http://pewforum.org/docs/index.php?DocID=55>>). See also Alan Wolfe et al., “Scholars Infuse Religion with Cultural Light,” *Chronicle of Higher Education* (22 October 2004): B6-B13, for a suitably nuanced set of analyses.

6. A dated but still valuable account of psychology’s “takeover” of education is Walter S. Monroe’s *Teaching-Learning Theory and Teacher Education, 1890–1950* (New York: Greenwood, 1952). Better known and more broadly based is Herbert M. Kliebard’s *The Struggle for the American Curriculum: 1893–1958* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986). A fine argument for a balanced liberal and technical teacher education is Merle L. Borrowman’s *The Liberal and the Technical in Teacher Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1956).

The controversy over accountability has spawned an enormous volume of literature. One especially creative treatment is in Gary Clabaugh's "No Flower Shall Wither; Or, Horticulture in the Kingdom of the Frogs," *Educational Horizons* 82, no. 2 (2004): 99–102. Another is the delightful fantasy by John S. Taylor, "Absolutely the Best Dentist," *The School Administrator Web Edition* (June 2000), <http://www.aasa.org/publications/sa/2000_06/coltaylor.htm>.

7. As one might expect, there is a massive amount of literature discussing the Christian's relationship to the state and the surrounding culture.

Representative works include the great classic taxonomy in H. Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper and Row, 1951). Stanley Hauerwas takes a frankly countercultural position in the wonderfully subtitled *After Christendom: How the Church Is to Behave If Freedom, Justice, and a Christian Nation Are Bad Ideas* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991). Richard John Neuhaus views our government and dominant culture as hostile to faith in *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984). Stephen Carter, on the other hand, takes a wry look in *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion* (New York: BasicBooks, 1993), asserting that the dominant liberal culture is determined to trivialize faith; that few in America are hostile to religion, just so long as religion amounts to nothing more than a private hobby.

8. George Washington, Farewell Address (1796), in *Harvard Classics*, vol. 43, ed. Charles W. Eliot (New York: P. F. Collier & Son, 1910), 250–268.

9. Jim Wallis, *God's Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005). Although Wallis's Bush-bashing occasionally gets tiresome (however justified it may seem at times), and his "prophetic politics" sometimes more resembles petulant politics, the entire book is nevertheless a vivid testimony against the secularist politics that have long been a dominant motif of the Democrats.

10. David McKenzie, "Separation and Accommodation in the Public Schools," *Educational Horizons* 82, no. 1 (Fall 2003): 24.

11. Lowell Rose, "No Child Left Behind: The Mathematics of Guaranteed Failure," *Educational Horizons* 82, no. 2: 121–130; and Alfie Kohn, "Test Today, Privatize Tomorrow: Using Accountability to 'Reform' Public Schools to Death," *Phi Delta Kappan* 85 (8): 38.

12. Irving M. Bunim, "Pirke Avoth (Ethics of the Fathers)," in *Ethics from Sinai: An Eclectic, Wide-Ranging Commentary on Pirke Avoth*, vol. 1 (New York: Phillip Feldheim, 1964), 1.